

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Identifying natural areas

The birdwatching fraternity is now spread all over the country, and we continue to receive reliable descriptions of habitats which need to be preserved for their aesthetic or ecological values. Perhaps the time has come for us to work on the basis of the Survey of India maps, and on a grid of 100 x 100 km's list and describe places of outstanding interest. If we have this information it would be a good instrument for alerting the local authority concerned to safeguard these places against future destruction. Administrators complain that environmentalists surface on the scene after projects have been announced and after several steps, financial and others, have run their course. The fact is that citizens have no knowledge about what is happening within the precincts of the Secretariat or the Municipality or Local Board. So we have to take the initiative, or be accused of being late arrivals.

We need to appoint a Project Coordinator in each State who would identify knowledgeable people in various areas capable of this exercise. Major BM Appachu of SECON has agreed to supply suitable maps for use in this Project. I can think of a score of contributors to the Newsletter who could participate in this work, and I hope to get some response.

I know you think that I am being unrealistic, but it is strange how perceptions change with a little success. Remember that it was a single letter to the Times of India that saved the lovely evergreen forest of Karnala from being converted into an Industrial Estate of the Maharashtra government.

In the UK there is a scheme known as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Even a single tree on which a rare bird is nesting qualifies to be so designated and protected. We can think of small woodlots on the peripheries of our cities which need to be saved in their natural condition. I repeat that unless we take the initiative there is little likelihood of government or builders and developers showing any concern for these areas. A slight curve on a highway needs to be straightened, so a 500 year old banyan tree is hacked down. The number of stately banyans that were cut down on the Bangalore-Hosur highway runs into hundreds, and now many more will be obliterated on the proposed Bangalore-Mysore project costing Rs 4000 crores. I wish our road makers were ornithologists/ecologists; we would then have a highway, in partnership with nature, which would be shady, cool and beautiful, weaving through the trees. Perhaps it may slow down the traffic and lead to fewer accidents.

Rare Sightings

I receive several reports relating to rare sightings of birds, birds not previously recorded in the areas referred to. Santharam and others suggest quite rightly that such reports should not be accepted unless very carefully scrutinised. Quite right. But the Newsletter only makes an offering. BNHS/SACON can decide to accept or reject it. The Editor will

follow the advice of Emperor Jehangir: Let the credit rest with the relator. Rishad Naoroji has written to say that Samiran Jha did not express himself properly about the sighting of the white-bellied sea eagle in Malda. Rishad writes (7.6.1997) that both he and Asad Rahmani are now convinced that the bird was a WBSE.

Salim Ali Wildwings Trust

Under the direction of JC Daniel a number of projects are under way. The Birds of Kerala is being revised and reprinted. There is a project on the Ecology Thattekkad, an attempt to prepare a scientific management plan for the Bird Sanctuary.

An interesting fact which comes to light is that in 1930 only 3 species of water birds were recorded by Salim Ali, "but now we have 27 species of water birds". The Principal Investigator is R Sugathan. The Project on Community Participation in the case of Bird Trappers, is likely to throw some light on how to divert this activity into less harmful channels.

Untidy manuscripts

I receive some handwritten pieces which are so untidy that I do not use them and prefer to give precedence to those neatly typed. Please take the trouble to be as clear and neat as possible. Double or triple spacing helps in editing a piece.

Birding in Kotagiri

PRAVEEN J, XIV/779(2), "Ambadi", K. Medu P.O. Palakkad, Kerala 678 013

The Nilgiris has always been a fascination for a biologist — its unique climate, ecology, flora and fauna were subjected to many in depth studies in the past. Once you reach the summits of these blue mountains, the familiar features of the plains are lost and they are replaced by several high altitudinal elements. The same is true for birds as I discovered during my brief stay at Kotagiri, a languid hill station in the north-western slopes of the Nilgiris.

It has been my well-cherished dream for sometime to visit the shola patches of the Nilgiris. My chance came during the 22nd and 23rd of August 1996 when Mr Bhoopathy of Kotagiri Wildlife Association invited me to this place for birding. I was accompanied by my friend, Sanju and we were stationed very close to the Kotagiri town (c.1900m). This serene land with hills looming all around has not yet faced the commercialisation and tourist rush which has been the bane of many a hill resort in the Nilgiris. Hence the town environs had their own share of birds.

House sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) seemed to have followed the scent of man to these distant lands and so far were the most common birds in the town. Another bird present in equal profusion was the Nilgiri White-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosa*) — so contiding were these birds when they foraged among the low bushy post-monsoon growth on the roadside that one finds it hard to focus the binoculars on them. They seemed a cut above the house sparrows in terms of abundance as they were equally common during our field trips while the former was never observed outside the town environs. The trilling musical whistles of those beauties still prick my ears as I write this note. Other birds recorded near our lodge include purple and purplerumped sunbirds which were exceedingly rare compared to their congener, the small sunbird (*Nectarinia minima*). Also present were the dusky crag martins (*Hirundo concolor*) which looped and wheeled in mid-air presumably after winged insects. Many other aves like ashy wren-warblers (*Prinia socialis*), Nilgiri flycatcher (*Eumyias albicaudata*), spotted doves, redwhiskered and redvented

bulbuls, jungle mynas and of course the crows were spotted near the town.

Our first trek was to the Genepool near Kodanad view-point; a 250 hectare ecosystem with grasslands and fragmented sholas together with several sub-tropical vegetations providing diversity. Mixed hunting flocks which were numerous near the edges of the sholas had prominent members like black and yellowbrowed bulbuls, greyheaded and Nilgiri flycatchers, velvetfronted nuthatches, white-eyes, quaker babblers and orange minivets. They were occasionally joined by a few yellowcheeked tits and very rarely by grey tits and pied flycatcher-shrikes. Scimitar babblers (*Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*) were calling energetically from the thickets but all we could manage was a mere glance at a calling bird. The breeding chorus of the painted bush quails (*Perdica erythrorhyncha*) were heard near the vast grassy expanses of the gentle slopes. As we neared the end of our trek, Nilgiri laughing thrushes called from a riverine shola to mark 'finis' for the trip.

The next trip was to the Longwood shola which lies very near to Kotagiri town. This 300 hectare forest land has been well protected with wire fencing and display boards were erected near the entrance. Had it not been for the timely conservation measures of Kotagiri Wildlife Association this remnant patch might have gone the way of many of the lost sholas of this sensitive region. The health of the biotope was vividly reflected on the avifauna as this ninety minute trip proved to be the most exciting of our visit. We were welcomed by the heartening calls of the Nilgiri laughing thrushes (*Garrulax cachinnans*), which permitted us more than enough time to watch them closely. Another interesting and beautiful bird which we met with was a pair of black and orange flycatcher (*Ficedula nigrorufa*); Nilgiri wood pigeons (*Columba elphinstonii*) were observed a few times and we even got an opportunity to see a crested goshawk (*Accipiter trivirgatus*) as it just took off from a low perch. Black bulbuls were ubiquitous and noisy while a threetoed woodpecker (*Dinopium javanense*) was seen clambering up a tree trunk. It was

unfortunate that we had to cut short our trip due to bad light in the late evening.

Our final field trip was to Mamaram from where we covered the Kollikarai reserve forest and ended up near Chemmanarai river and returned by the same route. Here the habitat was a bit diverse permitting variety for avian-life. An initial part of our trip led us through some coffee plantations with isolated tall trees scattered here and there. Many deciduous species like chestnut-headed bee-eaters, lorikeets, jungle babblers, Nilgiri flowerpeckers, small green barbets and crested tree swifts were spotted. Here we saw a small raptor perched up a tall leafless tree and its field features suggest *Accipiter nisus* (sparrow hawk). A small pocket of land had rubber trees cultivated along with coffee and consequently birdlife appeared sparse except along the edges. After crossing the Kollikarai river we passed through the more familiar vegetation of tropical wet and semi evergreen forests. Birds like gold-fronted chloropsis, racket-tailed and bronzed drongos, black-capped, quaker and spotted babblers, fairy bluebirds, large cuckoo shrikes, ioras, monarch flycatchers etc. were recorded here. It was here for the third time during this visit that I found the dusky brown (Rusty as we call) squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus*) among the mixed hunting troops of birds. I have witnessed the same situation in Mukkali and Dhoni, both in Palakkad district (Kerala). Was it a mere coincidence or whether the squirrel benefits in some way by foraging along with birds is still a mystery to me. An insight into the feeding biology of this squirrel might throw possible answers.

As the understorey thickened we saw Malabar trogons, scimitar babblers, small sunbirds, rufous babblers and emerald doves; calls of hill mynas, blue-winged parakeets and yellow-naped woodpecker were noted. After a while we descended to the Chemmanarai river through a dense growth and here we saw a pair of white-bellied blue flycatchers

(*Cyornis pallipes*) when the male bird produced a low toned swee-wee-swee song from the lower canopy of the undergrowth. The absence of the typical endemics we had noted at Longwood Shola and the variety of the avifauna here, might be due to the lower elevation of this area and the consequent mixed vegetation together with human disturbances.

Apart from the birds observed from the town and the field trips, many birds were noted while we were not actually birding like travelling by bus or even waiting for one. Rufous-backed shrike, house swift, lesser golden-backed woodpecker, magpie robin and pied bushchat are some of the birds which were mostly observed near the wide spanning tea estates. Here I could not help commenting on the scrublands adjoining the foothills of the ghats where we could not get down. As I could not manage a seat in the bus not many birds were spotted except for a pied crested cuckoo which flew across the road. Birders might find it interesting to visit this scrub jungle on their return journey from Kotagiri.

Due to the lack of species diversity only 65 species were recorded of which at least 50 were noted during the birding treks. There has been a noticeable scarcity of migrants as the winter had not set in. Marsh and water dependent birds too were absent.

The highlight of our trip was to see the way in which a dedicated bunch of people had changed the whole scene of ecological destruction into a natural paradise by their persistent conservation measures. The Longwood shola of Kotagiri is a living testimony of this herculean task which the Kotagiri Wildlife Association (KWA) had so convincingly achieved.

I thank Mr Bhoopathy of KWA who so generously conducted us during these two days.



Birding at Chakrasila Wildlife Sanctuary and Sighting of Some New Birds not Recorded Earlier

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Chakrasila Wildlife Sanctuary (CWS) is an ideal spot for bird watchers. Its biodiversity provides many niches for several species of residential birds and attracts hundreds of migratory birds from far off places.

This youngest sanctuary of North East India having an area of 11,206 acres is located in the district of Dhubri, the Western most Region of Assam adjacent to the Cooch-Bihar district of West Bengal. Geographically it is within the 26°15' to 26°26' North Latitude and 90°15' to 90°21' East Longitude.

Chakrasila has a hilly topography interspersed with three beautiful lakes, Dhir, Dipal and Dakra, on its southern periphery. The first two lakes have been identified as internationally important sites for protection of a number of species by the Asian Wetland Bureau, and the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau.

The sanctuary has different types of forest patches ranging from deciduous Sal forests to evergreen forests and bamboo forests to grasslands ringed with orchids, creepers and shrubs.

There are two major perennial springs inside the sanctuary. Their mellowed murmur adds to the charm of Chakrasila's natural surroundings.

Chakrasila is also endowed with a rich collection of mammals. Golden langur, pangolin, crab-eating mongoose, tiger, leopard, leopard cat and muntjak.

I have been studying the birds of Chakrasila since 1980 and keeping records of my findings. Last year I published a booklet on the Birds of Dhubri district incorporating a checklist and triplist where the birds of CWS were also included.

There is wide scope for exploring further the birdlife of CWS. In the Sept/Oct 1995 issue of the NLBW (Vol.35, No.5),

Maan Barua's observation of birds at CWS has been reported. In this report he has mentioned some birds which were not recorded earlier.

Starting from the World Environment Day, 5th June 1996, I made a three days' field trip to CWS. Interestingly, this time also, I sighted some birds which were not recorded earlier at Chakrasila, not even in Dhubri district. These birds were :

5th June 1996 :

- 1 Crested goshawk (*Accipiter trivirgatus*). In the afternoon a single bird was seen perched on a dead Sida tree (*Lagerstroemia parviflora*).
- 2 Black partridge (*Francolinus francolinus*). A male bird was spotted in the early evening on a grass patch along the Southern fringe of CWS.
- 3 Rufousbellied plaintive cuckoo (*Cacomantis merulinus*). This dull coloured bird was spotted in the canopy of an Ajhar tree (*Lagerstroemia flosreginae*).

6th June 1996 :

- 4 Ruddy crane (*Porzana fusca*). A single bird was spotted in the diffused morning light in a water logged area near the spring known as Bamuni Jhora.
- 5 Brown crane (*Amaurornis akool*). This bird was found in the bright morning, moving in every direction on the floating hyacinths and aquatic vegetation.
- 6 The large greenbilled malkoha (*Rhopodytes tristis*). This long tailed bird was seen flying and nesting within a new Sal (*Shorea robusta*) plantation.
- 7 Great pied hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*). This magnificent hornbill was observed sitting on a stout branch of a large Jamun tree (*Zyzigium cumini*) in the late morning.
- 8 Common wood shrike (*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*). This bird was found basking in the afternoon sun sitting on the top of a vertically elongated branch of a small tree.
- 9 Heartspotted woodpecker (*Hemicircus canente*). A pair of tiny woodpeckers was observed in the afternoon while they were tapping on the dry bark of an Amlakhi tree (*Phyllanthus emblica*).
- 10 Rufous woodpecker (*Micropternus brachyurus*). This brown coloured bird was brought into focus while pecking at a dry upper branch of a Sal tree (*Shorea robusta*) in the late afternoon.

7th June 1996 :

- 11 Orangebellied flowerpecker (*Dicaeum trigonostigma*). This tiny bird was spotted inside a tangle of creepers on the top of a medium size tree in the afternoon.

Other birds observed during the trip

Family — *Phalacrocoracidae*

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Little cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i> |
|--------------------|----------------------------|

Family — *Ardeidae*

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2 Purple heron | <i>Ardea purpurea</i> |
| 3 Pond heron | <i>Ardeola grayii</i> |
| 4 Cattle egret | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> |
| 5 Smaller egret | <i>Egretta intermedia</i> |
| 6 Little egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> |
| 7 Chestnut bittern | <i>Ixobrychus cinnamomeus</i> |

Family — *Ciconiidae*

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 8 Lesser adjutant | <i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i> |
| 9 Openbill stork | <i>Anastomus oscitans</i> |

Family — *Anatidae*

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 10 Cotton teal | <i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i> |
| 11 Lesser whistling teal | <i>Dendrocygna javanica</i> |

Family — *Accipitridae*

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 12 Brahminy kite | <i>Haliastur indus</i> |
| 13 Crested serpent eagle | <i>Spilornis cheela</i> |
| 14 Pariah kite | <i>Milvus migrans govinda</i> |
| 15 Indian whitebacked vulture | <i>Gyps bengalensis</i> |

Family — *Falconidae*

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| 16 Redheaded merlin | <i>Falco chicquera</i> |
|---------------------|------------------------|

Family — *Phasianidae*

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| 17 Red junglefowl | <i>Gallus gallus</i> |
|-------------------|----------------------|

Family — *Jacaniidae*

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 18 Bronzewinged jacana | <i>Metopidius indicus</i> |
|------------------------|---------------------------|

Family — *Columbidae*

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 19 Pompadour | <i>Treron pompadora</i> |
| 20 Green imperial pigeon | <i>Ducula aenea</i> |
| 21 Rufous turtle dove | <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i> |
| 22 Indian ring dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> |
| 23 Red turtle dove | <i>Streptopelia tranquebarica</i> |
| 24 Spotted dove | <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i> |
| 25 Emerald dove | <i>Chalcophaps indica</i> |

Family — *Psittacidae*

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 26 Alexandrine parakeet | <i>Psittacula eupatria</i> |
| 27 Roseringed parakeet | <i>Psittacula krameri</i> |
| 28 Redbreasted parakeet | <i>Psittacula alexandri</i> |

Family — *Cuculidae*

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 29 Pied crested cuckoo | <i>Clamator jacobinus</i> |
| 30 Common hawk cuckoo | <i>Cuculus varius</i> |
| 31 Indian plaintive cuckoo | <i>Cacomantis passerinus</i> |
| 32 Koel | <i>Eudynamis scolopacea</i> |
| 33 Crow pheasant | <i>Centropus sinensis</i> |

Family — *Strigidae*

- | | |
|--------------|------------------|
| 34 Barn owl | <i>Tyto alba</i> |
| 35 Eagle owl | <i>Bubo bubo</i> |

- 36 Spotted owl *Athene brama*
 37 Spotted scops owl *Otus spilocephalus*

Family — Caprimulgidae

- 38 Indian jungle nightjar *Caprimulgus indicus*

Family — Apodidae

- 39 Palm swift *Cypsiurus parvus*
 40 House swift *Apus allinis*
 41 The swift *Apus apus*

Family — Alcedinidae

- 42 Common kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
 43 Lesser pied kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*
 44 Whitebreasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*

Family — Meropidae

- 45 Green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*
 46 Chestnut headed bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*

Family — Coraciidae

- 47 Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*

Family — Upupidae

- 48 Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Family — Bucerotidae

- 49 Malabar pied hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus*

Family — Capitonidae

- 50 Coppersmith *Megalaima haemacephala*
 51 Lineated barbet *Megalaima lineata*
 52 Bluethroated barbet *Megalaima asiatica*

Family — Picidae

- 53 Lesser goldenbacked woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*

Family — Alaudidae

- 54 Redwinged bush lark *Mirafra erythroptera*

Family — Hirundinidae

- 55 Nepal house martin *Delichon nipalensis*

Family — Oriolidae

- 56 Blackheaded oriole *Oriolus xanthomus*

Family — Dicruridae

- 57 Black drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*
 58 Whitebellied drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*
 59 Haircrested drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*
 60 Lesser racket tailed drongo *Dicrurus remifer*
 61 Greater racket tailed drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*
 62 Bronzed drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*

Family — Artamidae

- 63 Ashy swallow shrike *Artamus fuscus*

Family — Sturnidae

- 64 Jungle myna *Acridotheres fuscus*
 65 Common myna *Acridotheres tristis*
 66 Pied myna *Sturnus contra*
 67 Greyheaded myna *Sturnus malabaricus*

- 68 Brahminy myna *Sturnus pagodarum*

- 69 Hill myna *Gracula religiosa*

Family — Corvidae

- 70 Indian tree pie *Dendrocitta vegabunda*
 71 House crow *Corvus splendens*
 72 Jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

Family — Campephagidae

- 73 Scarlet minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*
 74 Blackheaded cuckoo shrike *Coracina melanoptera*
 75 Large cuckoo shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*

Family — Irenidae

- 76 Goldenfronted chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*
 77 Common iora *Aegithina tiphia*

Family — Pycnonotidae

- 78 Redvented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*
 79 Blackcapped yellow bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus melanicterus*
 80 Redwhiskered bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*

Family — Muscicapidae**Sub-Family — Timalinae**

- 81 Slatyheaded scimitar babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*
 82 Spotted babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*
 83 Common babbler *Turdoides caudatus*
 84 Jungle babbler *Turdoides striatus*

Sub-Family — Muscicapinae

- 85 Little pied flycatcher *Muscicapa westermanni*
 86 Greyheaded flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*

Sub-Family — Sylviinae

- 87 Streaked wren warbler *Prinia gracilis*

Sub-Family — Turdinae

- 88 Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*
 89 Magpie robin *Copsychus saularis*
 90 Pied bush chat *Saxicola caprata*

Family — Nectariniidae

- 91 Purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*

Family — Ploceidae

- 92 Tree sparrow *Passer montanus*

Sub-Family — Estrildinae

- 93 Spotted munia *Lonchura punctulata*

Mixed flock observed during the trip :

| | Flock | Number |
|----|--------------------------|--------|
| I | Redbreasted parakeet | 8+ |
| | Roseringed Parakeet | 4 |
| II | Chestnutheaded bee-eater | 2 |
| | Black drongo | 3 |
| | Haircrested drongo | 1 |
| | Little pied flycatcher | 2 |

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|----|
| III | Spotted dove | 6 |
| | Red turtle dove | 2 |
| | Indian ring dove | 4 |
| | Spotted munia | 8+ |
| | Jungle myna | 2 |
| IV | Black-headed oriole | 1 |
| | Lesser racket-tailed drongo | 1 |
| | Indian tree pie | 2 |
| V | Indian roller | 2 |
| | Chestnut-headed bee-eater | 2 |
| | Magpie robin | 1 |
| VI | Redvented bulbul | 8+ |
| | Blackcapped yellow bulbul | 2 |
| | Redwhiskered bulbul | 4 |
| | Common iora | 2 |
| | Bluethroated barbet | 1 |

Notes :

During the trip I have also observed nesting of a few birds:

- I. A hanging nest of blackheaded oriole was sighted at one of the top branches of a Sai tree approximately at a height of 35 to 40 feet from the ground.

- II. Five big disorderly nests of pied myna were found scattered on the top of a banyan tree.
- III. Nests of redbreasted parakeets were found inside the holes of a dead tree.
- IV. A blackheaded yellow bulbul was spotted brooding on eggs in a cup shaped nest on the branches of a tree, only about five feet from the ground. I approached the bird slowly as close as of two feet. The bird cast a pensive look at me but did not make any attempt to fly. I decided not to disturb it and found my way in the forest.
- V. Two nests of spotted doves were located inside the bushes of a medium size tree at a height of about 15 feet from the ground.

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Flower-feeding and Pollination by Sunbirds in *Anisomeles* Species

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Information on bird-pollination systems is mainly based on studies made in American tropics, Australia and Africa (Pijl, 1937; Gill and Wolf 1975; 1978; Stiles 1978; Ford et al 1979; Hainsworth 1981; Carpenter 1983). These studies document that in the warmer regions of America, Asia and Africa, bird-pollination is very common. The pollinating birds in America are mostly humming birds while those in Asia and Africa are mainly the sunbirds and the white-eyes. Honeyeaters and lorikeets are shown to be the most consistent flower-feeders and pollinators of Australian flora. In all bird-pollination systems, the foraging success of nectar-feeding seems to be dictated by morphological details of the bill and the flower. Further, these features are subject to coevolutionary modifications and specialisations (Gill and Wolf 1978). Based on the information on bird-pollinated flowers,

they are classified into bird-flowers and flower-birds. The bird-flowers do not belong to any definite blossom class; they are comparatively small and attract the attention of unadapted birds. The flower-birds on the other hand are not always confined to blossoms exhibiting ornithophilous syndrome. In time of dearth of nectar, flower-birds utilise unadapted blossoms also.

With this background knowledge, a study on flower-feeding and pollination by sunbirds in unadapted blossoms of *Anisomeles malabarica* and *A. indica* (Lamiaceae) was made during July-January'97 at the foothills of Turimella forest zone (15x10' and 16x18' N' 78x45' and 79x34' E) in Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh, India.

The two *Anisomeles* species occupy different habitats in the same geographic region but both flower at the same time. Their floral characters are alike. They produce purple and fragrant flowers. The flowers have a personate floral form with a poorly developed upper lip and a well developed lower lip. The stamens and style extend beyond the upper lip. The whole flower structure resembles the classical gullet type blossom which is credited for precision and economy in pollen transfer by nototribic foraging behaviour of flower visitors. The flowers produce 1.6-1.8 µl of nectar/flower. The nectar has 32-48% sugar concentration. The sugars analysed by paper chromatography showed the presence of glucose, sucrose and fructose in that order of dominance in both species. The purple flowers coupled with high flower density amplified by patchy distribution of the two plant species appear to attract sunbirds consistently.

The sunbirds, namely, *Nectarinia asiatica* and *N. zeylonica* were observed to use the flowering *Anisomeles* populations as feeding stations and to forage on these flowers daily until flowering ceased. They probe the flowers by landing on inter-nodes of the inflorescence, inserting their bill and forehead into the flower mouth leading to the nectary and contacting the bifid stigma with their pollen-laden posterior edge of the bill and anterior edge of the forehead and thus effecting pollination. The birds contribute to active pollen-flow for cross-pollination by their regular and effective foraging on the plants within and between patches of flowering *Anisomeles*.

Ornithophilous flowers are usually red or brightly coloured with a poorly developed lower corolla lip, show protection against damage that might be done by a probing bird and contain large volume of less concentrated fructose and glucose-rich nectar. On the contrary, the *Anisomeles* flowers are purple with a well developed lower corolla lip, contain a

small amount of nectar with sugars in high concentrations. These flowers are regularly foraged by sunbirds. The feeding of sunbirds on such unadapted flowers of *Anisomeles* is obviously a consequence of non-availability of bird-flowers in the area during that period of a calendar year. Nevertheless, it is imperative for the sunbirds to feed on such unspecialised flowers with which only their survival is ensured during the flowering season of *Anisomeles*.

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Records of Broadbilled Roller, Brownbreasted Flycatcher and Blue chat

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Broadbilled Roller (*Eurystomus orientalis*)

The status of the broadbilled roller in the Western Ghats has been described as "rare and patchy" by the *Handbook*. It occurs in cultivation clearings in evergreen and semi-evergreen forest, in the low country and foothills upto c.500 m. Besides, its distribution is limited to Kerala, north to Wynaad, W. Mysore (Coorg dist) and Western Tamil Nadu

(Nilgiris dist). This population has been recognised as a distinct race *laetior*.

During the last few years of birdwatching in the Western Ghats, I have seen this roller only in a few localities, the details of which are given in the table.

| Date | Locality | Habitat | Numbers |
|-----------------|--|---|---------|
| 15-18 Sept 1986 | Manampalli, Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, T.Nadu | Settlement on clearing bordering evergreen forest | 2 |
| 26 Apr 1995 | Peringalkoothu (Vazhachal-Sholayar Road), Kerala | Area cleared for teak adjacent to semi evergreen forest | 2 |
| -do- | Vazhachal-Sholayar Road, 3-4 kms beyond Peringalkoothu, Kerala | Semi-evergreen forest clearing for power lines | 1 |
| -do- | Sholayar-Malakappara Road, 5-6 kms from Sholayar Dam, Kerala | Evergreen forest, power-line clearing | 2 |
| 23 Sept 1995 | Kuriarkutti, Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala | Evergreen, riverine forest | 1 |
| 19 Mar 1995 | Sholayar-Malakappara Road, 3-4 kms from Sholayar Dam, Kerala | Evergreen forest, powerline clearing | 2 |
| 13-15 May 1996 | Nedumgayam, Nilambur, Kerala | Riverine forest patch surrounded by Teak plantations | 2 |
| 15 May 1996 | Vattikkal, Nilambur, Kerala | Clear-felled teak plantation surrounded by semi-evergreen forests | 2 |
| 31 May 1996 | Top slip, Karian Shola, Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu | Semi-evergreen forest clearing | 1 |

It may be noted that but for the two sightings in Nilambur all the others are from the Anamalais, from contiguous forest habitat. The Anamalai hills are located immediately to the south of the Palghat Gap while Nilambur is a part of the Nilgiri biosphere area and to the west of the Nilgiri range. These sightings have been from clearings immediately surrounded by evergreen or semi-evergreen forests. The pair seen at Peringalkoothu appeared to be nesting as they were seen repeatedly going to a tree having a hollow on its trunk and once with an insect in the beak.

A perusal of recent publications shows that there have been very few reports of this species in Western ghats - Walayar (NLBW 34(4) : 79-82, 1994); Ponmudi-Kollar valley (NLBW 33(6) : 99-103, 1993); Top Slip (NLBW 33(6), 105-106, 1993); Sabarimala (quoted in Birds of Periyar - A Robertson & MCA Jackson, 1992); Wynaad (Forktail 8 : 11-23, 1993) and Nilambur (Nameer, Pers. Comm.). It has been recorded breeding at Kuriarkutti and at Periyar Shola in the Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary in mid-1970's (JBNHS 75 : 888-900, 1978).

Although it does not feature in the list of threatened birds in the Asian Red Data Book, the paucity of records of this bird in the Western Ghats indicates that the broadbilled roller may be locally threatened and merits more attention. One of the main reasons for its rarity could be the disappearance of lowland evergreen forests, its favoured habitat. I welcome

views from readers on this species and its status in the Western Ghats.

Brownbreasted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa muttui*)

The brownbreasted flycatcher is listed as a candidate species for the Asian Red Data Book. I have several sightings of this bird from 1983 onwards in southern India, details of which I present below.

I have located the bird on 15 occasions in Madras city in the Guindy National Park and at the Theosophical Society Estates. These sightings have been in the months of October to April. The earliest sighting in Madras has been on 20 October (1990) and the latest on 2 April (1984). My records indicate that this flycatcher is a winter visitor in small numbers, found in well-wooded habitats. I have also seen a couple of birds at Vedanthangal in late October 1985. These sightings are of interest as the bird is known to be a winter visitor to the Western Ghats in southern India and has been recorded in Pt. Calimere on the Coromandel coast where it could be a passage migrant en-route to Sri Lanka.

In the Western Ghats, I have come across this species at the following localities: Peechi-Vazhani, Makkali, Silent Valley, Nilambur, Wynaad and Thekkady (Kerala); Mundanturai, Kalakkad and Siruvani (Tamil Nadu), Koyna (Maharashtra) and Mollem (Goa). Excluding Peechi-Vazhani, I have 17 sightings in the Western Ghats between the months November and March.

At the Peechi-Vazhani Wildlife Sanctuary, near Trichur, where I was stationed for about two years, I have 40 sightings of this flycatcher from five locations. I estimate these pertain to 8-10 individuals. I have seen 2-3 birds in a kilometer stretch of suitable habitat, viz., overgrown stream beds, pathways etc. I have seen the bird here earliest by 10 October (1991) and latest by 20 March (1993).

My records indicate that the brownbreasted flycatcher may be fairly common in the Western Ghats. However, being a solitary bird, generally silent, found at lower strata of the forest in dull lighting conditions and due to its superficial resemblance to the commoner brown flycatcher (*Muscicapa latirostris*) it could be easily missed or mis-identified.

Blue Chat (*Erithacus brunneus*)

While working in the BNHS bird migration project at Sri Harikota, Nellore District, A.P., I chanced to ring a male blue chat in fine condition on 3 April 1990. The bird was trapped in a mist net in a light scrub jungle patch adjacent to a Eucalyptus plantation. The bird measured as follows: Wings - 76 mm; Bill (from skull) - 16 mm; Tarsus - 26 mm and Tail - 50 mm. It

weighed 19 gms. After ringing it was released and it flew directly into a bush. This was the only catch of this species in the 3 months of my stay on the island and I never saw this bird on any occasion. I have never encountered this species anywhere in Madras or Pondicherry, also on the Coromandel coast in the last 20 years of birdwatching.

However, Dr Ranjit Daniels (Pers. Comm.) has a sight record of the blue chat at the Madras Crocodile Bank (40 kms south of Madras, near Mahabalipuram). At Pt. Calimere, there are several records of the blue chat during October-November but none in spring (JBNHS 79 : 567-575, 1982). It was suggested that the birds may be using a different route on their return migration. Their winter range is Western Ghats and Sri Lanka. The birds seen at Pt. Calimere could be on passage to Sri Lanka. It is possible that blue chats wintering in Sri Lanka move along the Coromandel coast as this observation suggests, though more records are needed to confirm this.

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Sighting of The Asian Brown Flycatcher, on Passage In October at Dharwad, Southern Peninsula

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In the Handbook (A&R) it is said that the range and migratory routes of the Asian brown flycatcher, *Muscicapa daurica* Pallas, are not clearly understood since the bird has not one, but alternate or a 'disjunct' breeding range in Asia including India, Japan, Korea and Southern Siberia. Further they have said that the bird winters erratically but sparsely over most of the Peninsula. Its main wintering grounds however, are located in the Ghats of Southern Indian Peninsula. In India, the bird has established alternate breeding grounds overlaying the Himalayas in the North, Chitteri range in the Eastern Ghats and Cardamom hills in the Western Ghats. Those breeding in the Himalayan region winter upto Gujarat during September-October. The Southern birds leave their breeding grounds in August and move northwards reaching the foothills of Dehra Dun in October. Thus the resident breeding population is increased by winter visitors in October in the north. Occasionally, in September-October, solitary individuals of this species are seen foraging in association with other birds in the gardens around Dharwad. One such typical individual with ashy brown body and with a conspicuous white ring round

the large dark eye was detected perched on a dead end of a twig projecting out from a low branch of a mango tree on Sunday, the 20th October 1996. It was hawking winged insects which it spotted at a distance about 20-30 feet away from its perch. It was enjoying feeding in the drizzle that was on, and the overcast sky had turned the mid-day light into an evening twilight. Now, the question is to which particular breeding stock would this lone member wintering at Dharwad in October belong? Would it belong to the stock of breeding residents of the Western Ghats or would it be from the stock of the Eastern Ghats. The October rains that occur due to the influence of North Eastern monsoonal winds possibly drive them eastwards. It is solvable only through ringing experiments. Nevertheless, the manner in which this flycatcher was enjoying in its own special way, the drizzling atmosphere of the October rains in Dharwad suggests that its preferred 'climatic niche' was in the North East where monsoonal winds, weather conditions, shade, shelter, light, dark foliage canopy, temperature and humidity with a soft drizzle approximates to conditions in Dharwad at that time.



Meeting old friends is certainly a pleasure: Making new ones has its own charm. I have earlier tried to give a brief idea of old feathered friends an Indian birder is likely to encounter in Tanzania; I will now attempt to write about new friends similar to ones you might leave behind in India. With similar climate and flora, you do come across a lot of birds which have close relatives in India. It is not my intention to give an exhaustive list of such birds; I am only giving examples that I came across myself during my short one month stay in Tanzania in April this year. These are the birds that an Indian visitor is most likely to come across.

Let me begin with the cormorants. The little cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*) of India is replaced by the longtailed cormorant (*P.africanus*) in Tanzania. You will presume the latter is the same bird till you check in the book. *Africanus* has a little white on its throat that is lacking in the Indian version. The large cormorant (*P.carbo*) is found in both countries. The Tanzanian bird has far more white than the Indian though.

Among herons and egrets, there are more common species than cousins. I have already written about them in my last piece. Examples are many among the storks. Take the adjutant stork (*Leptoptilos dubius*), for example. In Tanzania it is replaced by the marabou (*L. crumeniferus*). The two look exactly the same and I have been unable to tell the difference. From illustrations, it appears that the marabou's bald head is more red and its strange neck pouch is bigger. It also appears to have a red patch on the nape of the neck. Both have the same habits and disposition.

The black necked stork (*Xenorhynchus asiaticus*) of our country is represented in Tanzania by the saddle billed stork (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*). Both have the same silhouette and colour pattern down to the yellow eye of the females. The saddle bill has a distinctive design on its bill that gives it its name and differentiates it from its Indian cousin. Similarly, the open billed storks of the two countries go as far as having the same silhouette and beak shape. However, while the Indian specimen (*Anastomus oscitans*) is a dirty white colour with black primaries, its counterpart (*A.lamelligerus*) is dark grey, almost black. The latter also has a bicoloured beak. The two have similar habits though. The painted stork (*Ibis leucocephalus*) of our land has its counterpart in the yellow billed stork (*Mycteria ibis*). The latter does not have the delicate pink shading of the former but has a red patch around the eye. As the name suggests, its bill is yellow.

Coming to the vultures, you do not see them as often as you would in Indian cities. However, in the game parks, vultures are as common a back drop as they are in India. The two species that I saw have cousins in India. The African white backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) is like our own (*G.bengalensis*) except that it has a paler almost white neck and white flanks. The king vulture (*Torgos calvus*) of India gets replaced by the lappet faced vulture (*Aegypius tracheliotus*).

New Friends In Tanzania

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The latter is more pink than red on its face, does not have red flanks and is much larger.

A common bird on Lake Victoria is the African fish eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*). This is a beautiful bird with a white head and a brown body. Its habits are the same as the Pallas fish eagle (*H.leucoryphus*) of India. The latter's head is not pure white though. Both have very distinctive and penetrating calls.

Seeing the Kori bustard (*Ardeotis kori*) fluff out its neck feathers and display in Ngorongoro crater makes it an unmistakable cousin of the great Indian bustard (*Choriotis nigriceps*). However, while the former is still common in the wild life parks, our Indian variety, though extremely difficult to see, is a better looking cousin with a larger size and whiter neck. There are also a whole lot of smaller bustards in Tanzania, with or without black bellies, which resemble our likh (*Sypheotides indica*). Of these, I was able to see only one, the whitebellied bustard (*Eupodotis senegalensis*). Books describe a number of other *Eupodotis* species most of which have black bellies like our Bengal florican (*E.bengalensis*).

You are almost sure to come across two plovers in the Tanzanian parks, the blacksmith plover (*Vanellus amatus*) and the crowned lapwing (*V.coronatus*). The blacksmith gives the effect of our spur-winged plover (*V.spinatus*) but is more pied in appearance and the colour pattern is different. For one, it has a white crown. The crowned lapwing has a delicate crown in the form of a white ring on its head. It gives the effect of our yellowwattled lapwing (*V.malabaricus*) but has a small red wattle at the base of its bill. Incidentally, the spur winged plover is found in Tanzania also but I did not see it.

I have written about common and similar pigeons and doves in my last write up. Among coucals, I was able to see one, the white browed coucal (*Centropus superciliosus*). It has the same profile as our crow pheasant (*C.sinensis*), is slightly smaller and but for its brown wings gives a pied effect.

Bee-eaters are well represented in Tanzania. The most common is the little bee-eater (*Merops pusillus*). It is obviously a bee-eater but not as green as our little green bee eater (*M.orientalis*). It also measures 15 cms against 22 cms of the latter. The European bee-eater (*M.apiastr*) is found in both countries.

Driving down the dusty dirt roads that lead into the game parks of Tanzania, you feel very much at home when you see small finch-larks flying off in front of your car. The species you are most likely to see in Tanzania is the Fischer's sparrow lark (*Eremopterix leucopareia*). It looks like our own ashy crowned finch-lark (*E.grises*) except for a slightly white forehead of the latter.

I missed most of the wagtails as they had returned to their summer quarters in Europe by April. However, one resident wagtail, the African pied wagtail (*Motacilla aguimp*) looks virtually like our large pied wagtail (*M.maderaspatensis*). Both have prominent white eyebrows and are typical wagtails.

Tanzania has its share of white eyes. I saw only one, the montane white eye (*Zosterops polioaster*). But for a more prominent white ring round the eye, there is no way of telling it apart from our Indian white eye (*Z. palpebrosa*) in the field. The variety of sunbirds beats what we have in India. I was able to see two species. The red crested sunbird (*Nectarinia erythrocerca*) is very similar to our purple sunbird (*N. asiatica*) but is greener and has a red chest. The malachite sunbird (*N. famosa*) is very green and has long pin feathers sticking out of its tail.

I have covered crows in my earlier write up. As far as starlings go, Tanzania has a group called the glossy starlings that you do not see in India. In fact, no starling in Tanzania is as common as our common myna (*Acridotheres tristis*). In the countryside, the starling seen most often is the superb starling (*Spreo superbus*). As the name implies, this is a superb looking bird, with a rainbow of colours. You can look out for it when you enter game parks like Mikumi. This last named park is much smaller than its northern cousins but is easy to visit from Dar if you are on a short visit. A comfortable three and a half hours drive from Dar on a good road, it is often the only park you can visit during short stays.

The area where variety is far ahead of India is the grass-seed eating birds. My own theory is that the grasslands of India got converted to farm land with its hordes of human beings. Most of Tanzania is still open grassland, leading to a proliferation of grass-seed-eating birds. Most do not have equivalents in India but are a treat to watch for even those who are not interested in birds. April is the best month to see them as they are all in their breeding plumage and will provide a sight that is not easy to forget.

The most spectacular is the acacia paradise whydah (*Vidua paradisaea*). The bird itself is only 15 cms long but in the breeding season, the male develops a 30 cms long tail. The relative size and width of the tail would rival that of the peacock. There are at least three more whydahs that have equally impressive tails as far as length goes but the tails are

not so thick. In each species, only the males develop the tails. Two more sets of birds that develop very impressive breeding plumages are the bishops and the widow birds. The former do not sport long tails but become a brilliant red to attract the dull looking females. The latter are primarily black when breeding but grow tails that rival those of the whydahs. It is the black colour that gives them the name of widow birds.

The largest variety is reached among the weavers. Against four species of weavers in India, there are at least 45 species in East Africa in general and about 25 in Tanzania. All build hanging nests that are woven although the exact design varies from species to species. Yellow is the most prominent and common colour. Even in the short stay that I had, I was able to see five different species. The baglafaecht weaver (*Ploceus baglafaecht*) has an orange head with a yellow eye that has a black patch running through it. The blacknecked weaver (*P. nigricollis*) is not as social as the other weavers, looks like the baglafaecht with the addition of a black neck. The golden backed weaver (*P. jacksoni*), on the other hand, is highly social, has a black head that is sharply demarcated from the golden back. The breast is streaked with chocolate brown. The Speke's weaver (*P. spekei*) combines a black face mask with heavy mantle streaking. Like most weavers, it is also a social bird. The white headed buffalo weaver (*Dinemellia dinemelli*) is as big as a myna and is not yellow. It is generally white with a black beak. Its wings and tail are dark brown but the rump and vent are red.

In this and my earlier write up on birds common to India and Tanzania, I have tried to briefly describe some of the birds that an Indian visitor is likely to come across in a short visit to Tanzania. I have compared them to similar Indian birds so that they can be identified with. Since I have only covered birds that I saw, they are the ones that are most common and would normally be seen. Of course, having or purchasing a good book on East African birds would be a great help.

Happy birding in Tanzania !



Whitethroated Ground Thrush — A Close Study

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For over six weeks during February-March 1997 we had plenty of opportunities to study the features and behaviour of the whitethroated ground thrush from within a distance of 10 to 15 feet, sometimes even less. So there was no need to use binoculars. During 1996 and 1997 we could see a solitary bird, only for a minute or two during dusk, feeding on ground covered with dry leaves, searching with its bill for insects. It would fly off the moment it saw us approaching. The bird is seen in Rishi Valley only during the winter months, arriving by November-December and leaving by March end.

By sheer chance we saw a pair of them, feeding on what we could guess as maggots and other tiny grubs in an almost stagnant, slushy water in the middle of a somewhat broad stream which carries waste water from the dining hall of the school. The birds could be seen getting into the slush, with their toes completely submerged, picking up grubs at a very fast pace — almost one a second — and swallowing them. There were other ground feeders like a female magpie robin and a grey wagtail. These birds would not come anywhere near the slush in the middle of the stream bed. They

would feed in the moist parts of the stream. But they would never dirty their feet or bill. The ground thrushes chose to feed only in the slush: Only once, we saw three pairs feeding, though a little away from each other. Sometimes we have seen two pairs but we were certain of seeing one pair at any time of the day. The place is shady with trees on both sides, some of them overlaid with thorny creepers, allowing very little sunlight to penetrate.

What surprised us was the absence of wing bars, so prominently shown in the illustration of this bird in the Pictorial Guide (Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley — 1983 edition) Plate 85, Fig.3. All that we could notice was a faint whitish streak in the shoulder region and whitish edge on its wings. Even the Compact Handbook (Vol.9 No.1734 2nd Edition) pages 89-92 says, 'Wings have a white shoulder bar and whitish edge. White and black head pattern is diagnostic'. We could not see the white bars at all in any of the thrushes. The first edition of Compact Handbook has a full picture of the bird which appears true to life: It shows faint white shoulder streaks and whitish edge but no white bar, shown so very distinctly in the 2nd edition of the Compact Handbook and the Pictorial Guide. The picture of the bird in the 12th edition of the Book of Indian Birds (1996) also does not have the white shoulder bar. However, the dark brown oblique stripes are not true to life. We hope we will be able to photograph this bird some day.

The best description of this bird is given in "The Birds of South India" by Lt Col HR Baker and Chas M Inglis (1930). Here also there is no mention of white shoulder bars. It says, "... under-wing coverts slaty blue tipped with white, a large patch of white on the underside of the quills". If at all visible, this patch of white can be noticed on the underside of the wings only when the bird flies.

We found the bird to be a very efficient feeder. Hugh Whistler in his Popular Handbook of Indian Birds (Revised and Enlarged 4th Edition) describes a peculiar habit of this thrush. He says "Due to its constant search for insects, snails and caterpillars, its beak is nearly always muddy, a fact remarked by many writers". We observed something more. Every now and then the bird would fly off to a nearby branch and clean its beak by rubbing against the bark and would return to the same stinking slush to resume feeding.

We had often sat for an hour or so observing the birds' feeding behaviour and interaction with other birds nearby. Any slight movement of the hand or leg on our part would make the bird(s) fly off, only to return in a minute or two. But we kept on chattering and passing information to our guide Mr Rangaswami loudly. This didn't disturb the bird. This only showed that the bird is very sensitive to visual stimuli and not so to auditory stimuli. Also the bird, which appears very meek and harmless, never cared for the other birds in the vicinity. A female paradise flycatcher would fly over its head; or a magpie robin would brush past it. Nothing could distract the bird from its almost non-stop feeding on the grubs and maggots. But any movement on our part made the bird fly off, only to return to the same spot, a little later.

For the first time, during our two years of birdwatching, we could sit in one spot and concentrate on a single species. It was a joyful experience spread over several days and weeks. Also, we could identify the bird to the sub-species level as *Zoothera citrina cyanotus*.

We thank our guide Mr S Rangaswami for encouraging us to study the species closely, consult the literature available on this bird in our school library and above all in editing this article which is based on our study of this species for nearly six to seven weeks. Our only regret is that the birds did not call or sing even once. Books say their calls are melodious. But the birds did not oblige us. All chose to remain silent even when provoked by a female magpie robin occasionally. Another feature we observed was the light pink (flesh-colour) of its legs.

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CORRESPONDENCE

ORIENTAL DARTER. ANHINGA MELANOGASTER. DR R SUGATHAN, Field Director, Salim Ali Wildwings Trust, and ABY P. VARGHESES, 16/186 'Chandar Niwas', Sion (East) Bombay 400 022

Oriental darters are considered globally threatened species and hence have been suggested for inclusion in the Asian Red Data Book for birds. Avifaunal studies conducted in Kerala, especially in Thattakadu Bird Sanctuary and Kumarakom, the proposed 'Vembanadu Water Birds

Sanctuary', from 1994 January to 1996 July gives the present status of darters in Kerala.

Thattakadu Bird Sanctuary is a tropical bird community sanctuary. Water birds also reside in the wetland areas seen inside the declared area, formed by the construction of Bhoothathankettu Dam. The water level in the wetlands frequently fluctuates and during the South West Monsoon season every year the water is completely drained out for a period of 3 months. Most of the water birds' breeding coincides with this season and thus the adults are very badly

affected. In spite of this, every year the bird population increases.

Breeding of darters has not been recorded from the sanctuary, but during 1994-95 we have recorded 35+ birds and in 1995-96 July 65+ birds from the study area. This increase in the population indicates that the darter population in Thattakadu is in good condition without any threat to their future. Now we are making efforts to keep the wetlands undisturbed and provide artificial nesting facilities (on an experimental basis) for the conservation of water birds in Thattakadu Bird Sanctuary.

The Vembanadu estuary is the biggest wetland in Kerala. Many rivers which originating from the Western Ghats bring fresh water to the lake. Kuttanad, the 'rice bowl of Kerala' is close to the lake. The lake is bounded by human habitation and industries. There used to be a thick belt of mangrove along the water edge. But now, due to urbanisation, industrialisation and indiscriminate tree felling, only a thin belt of mangrove, exists. Lime shell collection and fishing are the major activities in the lake.

Vembanadu lake estuary is the traditional wintering area for large numbers of waterfowl in Kerala. A scientific study of the flora and fauna of this area is going on under the Kerala Forest Department (Wildlife). In the preliminary studies three major nesting areas, such as KTDC complex area, Pathiramanal Island and R. Block areas, were covered. About 15,000-20,000 night herons, little cormorants, large cormorants, darters, egrets and other herons are found breeding in these areas. Due to lack of proper scientific management the nesting area becomes degraded and as a result there is competition among the nesting species of birds.

This year in Kumarakom we observed the courtship display flight of 150+ darters. From the KTDC complex area and Pathiramanal Island we recorded 200 nests of darters.



Darters in Flight
April 1996 Kumarakom, KTDC Complex

Even though there are disturbances from the tourists and high intensity of electric lights from the Taj Hotel Complex, the darters build nests. We noticed 63 nests on trees in this area alone.

Darters prefer tall nesting trees such as *Ficus religiosa*, *Artocarpus sp*, *Casuarina sp*, *mangrove sp* etc. for nesting. From the data it is clear that the total population of Indian darters in the Vembanadu lake will be 600 or more. Comparing this population size with other states in South India, the population in Vembanadu area is appreciable. Unfortunately there is no conservation activities in Vembanadu lake. As darters are suggested for inclusion in the Asian Red Data Book for birds, it is highly essential to take steps to declare the Vembanadu waterbody and the nesting areas as a waterbird sanctuary.

The influx of residential and migratory wetland birds in Thattakadu and Vembanadu estuary may be due to the loss of/ and disturbances in the wetlands of Kerala. Unless such habitats are regularly monitored and scientifically managed we are going to lose our valuable endangered species of waterbirds from the world.

[Editor: refer to V Santharam's article in NLBW, Vol.36, No.3, p.53-54]

BIRDS SEEN FROM THE BUS BETWEEN KOVILPATTI AND TUTICORIN. H. DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinganagar South, Tiruchirapalli 620 017

Travelling in a bus, I observed birds mostly on one side, and when possible on the other side as well, of the road from Kovilpatti (9.2°N 77.9°E) to Tuticorin (8.8°N 78.2°E), on 13th June 1996. The storm over the Bay of Bengal had crossed over to Andhra Pradesh and it was relatively calm, though windy and mildly sunny. The road was in somewhat good condition. The bus sped along and I had, during the run, only a fleeting glimpse of the birds, though I was sure of what birds I saw. A black-winged kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) was peering from an electric wire at Eeral. Three peahens (*Pavo cristatus*) crossed the road over to the left side to descend the sloping sides and to the dry desert-like plain land. A few rose-ringed parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) were seen and heard at Ettayapuram, the birthplace of the famous Tamil Bard, Bharathiyar. By the bus stand was heard a piedcrested cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*). Palm swifts (*Cypsiurus parvus*) were flapping tirelessly about all along the road sides and over the fields beyond. The Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis*) was always seen on the electric wires or on the wing. On the roadside sitting on the ground were ashy crowned finch larks (*Eremopterix grisea*) that lifted up as if in a gust of wind on the approach of the bus. It is a common bird all along the way to Tuticorin. Uniformly grey in colour, shrike-like in size, shape and posture and sitting alone in a low roadside bush a few km on the Kovilpatti side of Ettayapuram was an unidentified bird. Waiting on the wires or riding the cattle with the hope of catching unwary insects coming in their way were the drongos

(*Dicrurus adsimilis*). The most ubiquitous never-to-be-missed in any place in Tamil Nadu and true to its name along this route too were the common mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*), walking along the roadside and on the roads, on the wing and in the trees. The figure of a bird that enlivened me through the rest of the journey was that of a gliding tree pie at Ettayapuram. Dropping from a tree it glided low so that I could clearly observe its dorsum; I turned in my seat to follow it, leaving the curious fellow-traveller wondering what it was all about. The mantle was of a brilliant reddish orange tinge- "brownish rufous" - mostly towards the lower part. It was *Dendrocitta vagabunda parvula* at the easternmost of its distribution between 77°E and 78°E. It was as if a reminiscence of the ones I had seen, while a boy, in the mango trees of our house compound in Nagercoil - 8.2°N, 77.4°E. At Tiruchirappalli - 10.8°N, 78.7°E - the race, *D.V.vemayi*, is paler. The house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) were, though not abundant, seen picking up grains particularly about the bus-stops.



BLACK STORKS IN KERALA. ANAND PRASAD, *Osho Commune, 17 Koregaon Park, Pune 411 001*

On 4th Feb 1997, whilst on a 3-week bird watching tour of the Nilgiris and Anamalai hills of S. India, I was on my way from Pollachi to Munnar. The people with whom I travelled stopped to take photos on the main road from Udumalaipettai to Munnar. The site was a small bridge over a wet area at the inlet to a large reservoir. From later study of the maps I can guess this lake must have been on the Amaravathi. It is between Amaravatinagar and Kombu on the map of Tamil Nadu. Whilst we stopped for ten minutes I scanned a wet area north of the road and to my surprise saw a black stork feeding with at least two whitenecked storks and at least two painted storks.

Black storks are so unmistakable that I feel no necessity to describe the bird, but I should add that I have had much previous experience with storks from the Pune area especially of openbilled, whitenecked and painted, and I have also seen the occasional white stork plus a flock of black storks near Pune only last year. I have no doubt this was a black stork. I had the chance to set up my telescope at a range of about 150 metres with a Nikon 78 mm at x 38 magnification. On my return from Munnar on 6th Feb 1997 as we passed the site from the bus I could see at least one more black stork. So there were at least two present. The black bird with white belly, red bill and legs was unmistakable even without field glasses.

This sighting is obviously fairly scarce for the south record. The pictorial guide states "single records from Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Sri Lanka" although I know of a handful of records from Kerala (Book of Kerala Birds by Neelakantan, Sashikumar, Venugopalan)



SIGHTING OF MORE THAN 50,000 TUFTED POCHARD IN MALDA DISTRICT. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, *N.S. Road, In front of T.O.P., Malda 732 101, W.B.*

During the waterfowl census on the morning of 30th Jan '97, I have seen more than 50,000 tufted pochard on the river Ganga, which flows by the side of Malda. During the day these birds rest on the Ganga.



RECORD OF LARGEST FLOCK OF GREAT CORMORANT IN NAMERI SANCTUARY, ASSAM. BIBHAB KUMAR TALUKDAR, *Animal Ecology & Wildlife Biology Laboratory, Department of Zoology, Gauhati University, Guwahati 781 014, Assam*

The great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), one of the three species of Phalacrocoracidae found in Assam, has been recorded throughout Assam in small numbers generally ranging from 20-40 at one spot. The population of *Phalacrocorax carbo* is in fact smaller than the most common and widely distributed *P. niger* in Assam. Here, I summarise the recent record of probably the largest flock of great cormorants in the Nameri sanctuary in Assam.

Nameri Sanctuary is situated between latitude 26° 53'N to 27° 02'N and Longitude 92° 39'E to 92° 55'E, in the civil district of Sonitpur, Assam. Nameri was declared as a Sanctuary in 1985 with an area of 137.02 sq km in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. Lying in the Bhabor tract, the habitat is composed of Tropical Evergreen, Semi-evergreen and Moist Deciduous forests with narrow strips of open grassland on the edge of some rivers and other water bodies. The waterbodies inside the sanctuary range from permanent, semi-permanent and seasonal. The River Bhareli along with river Nameri and Khari is a part of the sanctuary's ecosystem and satisfy the ecological needs of many species of flora and fauna.

I have been visiting Nameri sanctuary in connection with the survey of white winged wood duck since May 1995. On 20th May 1995 at around 1625 hrs I spotted ca 150 great cormorants sitting on the rocks of river Bhareli near Makahi area which lies in between Rehajuli and Potasali Forest camp of the sanctuary. On 5 December 1995 I recorded a group of ca 400 great cormorants in the Nameri river at 1046 hrs. I was astonished to see such a large flock of great cormorants as I never spotted such a large flock earlier. On 13 January 1996, I came down by rafting from Bhalkpong to Potasali along the river Bhareli, and in between Nameri and Baithakata Forest camp I spotted probably the largest flock of great cormorants in the bank of the river Bhareli, which consists of ca 500 individuals at 1600 hrs. The Nameri sanctuary is little explored and surveyed from the scientific point of view and I believe there might be nesting colonies of great cormorants in the area. The Nameri sanctuary is also linked with the Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary of Arunachal Pradesh. Further surveys are in full swing and will provide us new information on the great cormorants in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.



KING VULTURE [*SARCOGYPS CALVUS*] AND AQUILA EAGLE (*AQUILA SP.*) FEEDING ON BARHEADED GOOSE [*ANSER INDICUS*]. RAJIV SAXENA, MIG-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011 (MP)

On 16 January 1995, I visited Sakhya Sagar situated in the central part of Madhav National Park, Shivpuri (MP), to count the waterfowl as a part of midwater waterfowl census. At about 10 am, I was passing by the place known as Landing Station No.2, when my attention was caught by the activities of four large birds on the muddy shoreline of the lake. Through 7 x 50 binoculars, I spotted a pair of king vultures [*Sarcogyps calvus*], seven jungle crows [*Corvus macrorhynchos*] and two Eagles [*Aquila sp. clanga or pomarina* (?)] feeding on a dead bird.

Without approaching nearer I observed the proceedings. The vultures were continuously mobbed by the crows who were also jostling amongst themselves to get a chunk of meat. The eagles interfered intermittently and backed away with a gobble without giving the crows any chance to mob them.

The king vulture is described as timid and feeds when the pressure of other feeders has momentarily eased. In the present case, the vultures were feeding comfortably in the presence of eagles, perhaps due to the reason that the eagles had already gorged themselves.

After about 10 minutes the vultures flew off, and then the eagles flew one after the other — the last one carrying a leg of the dead bird — and sat on a nearby tree. I approached the spot to photograph the dead bird. It was a full grown barheaded goose [*Anser indicus*]. The cause of its death could not be ascertained.

According to Ali & Ripley [1983] the food of *Aquila clanga* includes purple and Indian moorhen, coot, tree pie and kingfisher while that of *A. pomarina* includes young or weakling birds. Naoroji [1990] found *A. clanga* feeding on chicks and juveniles of painted and openbill storks and cormorants. None of them recorded these eagles feeding on barheaded geese.

References

- Ali, S. and Ripley, S.D. [1983]. Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan [Compact Edition]. Oxford University Press.
- Naoroji, R. [1990]. Predation by Aquila eagles on nestling Storks and Herons in Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 87 : 37-46.



REPLY TO KAZMIERCZAK. SOUMYADEEP DUTTA, Nature's Beckon, "Datta Bari" Ward No.1, Dhubri 783 301, Assam

I have gone through the letter of Mr Krys Kazmierczak, published in the correspondence section of NLBW issue No.5 September/October 1996.

I appreciate Mr Kazmierczak's comments about my article "Birdwatching at Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary", because

he has expressed his opinion based on his knowledge to make the authors doubly sure about their reportings to be published in such a prestigious journal.

As regards my stand about his comment, I would like to say that while it is not unlikely that some minor mistakes may be committed by the birdwatchers in spite of their being very cautious, field birdwatchers must not be biased about the distribution information published in the reference books but they should remain true to their own observation. We could confidently identify only 68 species of birds in our field trip at Dibru-Saikhowa. There were some warblers and flycatchers which we could not identify because of their fleeting movement and presence inside the bush. Lineated barbet no doubt is a bird of Dibru-Saikhowa but in this particular trip this bird was not sighted by us, and one can't claim it to be absurd.

The large green barbet may not have been identified at Dibru-Saikhowa in the past, but during this trip we have identified them.

Although speckled woodpigeon is a Himalayan montane species normally found between 1800 to 4000 ft above sea level, it is not impossible to locate them at Dibru-Saikhowa, because Dibru-Saikhowa is adjacent to Arunachal Pradesh which is a part of the Himalayas. Their distribution is subject to nomadic seasonal movements dependent on fruit supply and ripening. They are largely frugivorous and arboreal. (Ali, Salim Field guide to the birds of the Eastern Himalayas). It is quite possible that attracted by large number of urum trees full of berries, which I have mentioned in my article, some of these birds came down to Dibru-Saikhowa. Besides, this species has been recorded earlier in Assam (checklist of the birds of Assam, 1990, Choudhury, Anwaruddin).

In conclusion I thank Mr Kazmierczak for his suggestion to observers and authors to pay more attention to the distribution information published in the Pictorial Guide and would, also, like to add: work more in the field and report authentically.



LARGE SCALE POISONING OF BIRDS OF PANIDIHING, DR D BAROOAH, Dass Pharmacy, Temple Road, Sibsagar 785 640, Assam

Terrible things are happening to the birds of the wetlands of Panidihing in Upper Assam. This 50 sq km area on the south bank of the Brahmaputra invites tens of thousands of migratory waterfowl in winter but only half of them return. Poison baiting with Furadon and Malathion is being practiced in an astoundingly large scale. Geese, ruddy shelduck, ducks, purple swamphen, egrets and herons are the common targets. The population of glossy ibis has shrunk from a steady 200 to less than 30. This is a breeding species of this wetland and is found only here in the entire North Eastern Region. The place is also a very important site for collection of fish by breeding adjutant storks. A half burnt and headless body of an adjutant was seen on 21st January 1997, and on enquiry I've been told that this individual was punished for its habit of lifting fish, by placing Furadon in the slitted abdomen of fish used as bait.

When the bird was half narcotised it was caught and doused with kerosene and burnt alive.

On 6th March 1997 while observing nesting adjutants in Baghor Chuk and Konworpur with Mr Hillol Jyoti Singha we noticed two juveniles dead in two separate nests. Poisoning of food and death of one of the parents leading to starvation might be the cause of this mortality. Walking through the grass-fields of the wetlands on 21st January 1997 I saw dead and decaying ducks some distance away from the site of actual poisoning. Sadly, the majestic fishing eagles are all gone. There were 4 pairs of greyheaded fishing eagles just 5 years ago. On 19th January 1997 our census team saw two marsh harriers and one pale harrier. They were still there possibly because of their habit of searching for food in different localities and I thought they would also perish if they choose to stay here longer.

Interestingly, inspite of this large scale killing, every visit to this wetland led to finding of interesting birds not seen before. Birds are still arriving because of the silence and abundance of food. On 22nd January 1995 we saw 26 rosy pelicans feeding with the commoner spotted-billed pelicans. On 2nd November 1996 Mr Dilip Bothakur, a keen bird watcher from Guwahati, spotted a crested goshawk 40 ft above a naked *Bombax ceiba* at Saragua - a village at the periphery of the wetland. On 21st January 1997 at 4.15 p.m. I saw a large gathering of 56 common cranes near Sagunpora Beel, deep inside Panidihing, from the bridge on the river Dimou in Balikur area (possibly 3 km away) with 20 x 50 field glasses. At 4.30 p.m. they lifted off and flew in an undulating broken ribbon formation towards the sand-bar of the Brahmaputra.

Two thirds of this wetland system is under the jurisdiction of the Forest department of Assam in the name of Panidihing Reserve Forest. Hopefully the department has taken up some initiatives to create a bird sanctuary in the area, and a survey was done in 95-96 resulting in a map of the proposed project. But on 2nd November 1996 and 21st January 1997 during the office hours (both working days) we saw the forest beat office of Saragua locked and deserted. Villagers said the office was seldom opened and only when officers came from district headquarters.

May I request the esteemed readers of our Newsletter to write to the Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), Assam/Rihabari/Guwahati 781 008 to press for protection of the wild birds of Panidihing because of its wonderful potential.

Reference

Birds of Panidihing, NLBW, Vol.34, No.4, pp 83-86.



RED-FACED MALKOHA IN INDIA. LT GEN B C NANDA, President, Coorg Wildlife Society, General Thimaya Circle, Madikeri 571 201

This is with regard to the query by T.W. Hoffman in Newsletter for Birdwatchers, Vol.37, No.1, January/February 1997 issue about the presence of the red-faced malkohas in India.

I enclose a copy extracted from the "Birds of Southern India including Madras, Malabar, Travancore-Cochin, Coorg and Mysore" by Lt Col HR Baker and Chas M Inglis MBOU, FZS, FES, Curator, Darjeeling National History Museum, 1930 edition.

In fact it is the description given by the authors that led me to conclude that the bird my wife and I observed on 25th August 1996 was most probably a red-faced malkoha.

Male : 'Length about 18"; tail 11"; wing 6.25"; tarsus 1.4"; bill from gape 1.6".

"Bill apple-green; Irides brown; whole sides of face crimson; legs and feet bluish slate" - (Legge).

"Crown, hind neck and sides of neck black, with a greenish gloss, narrowly streaked with white; rest of upper parts metallic bluish green; quills more blue; tail-feathers with long white tips, longest on the outer rectrices; chin and cheeks white with black shatt-marks; throat, and foreneck glossy black; rest of lower parts white" - (Fauna of British India).

Female : Similar to male except that the irides are white.

Locality, habits etc. : "Extreme South of Travancore where it has been obtained by Stewart" - (Fauna of British India).

A shy bird, seen in small flocks, and keeping to forests, and undergrowth. It feeds principally on fruit but has also been known to eat insects. Legge says the only note he heard it utter soundest like "Kaa" and that its flesh is tender and pleasant.

Breeding season : Breeds in Travancore in April and May where Stewart took the nests.

Nest : "The nests were typical Malkoha's nests, shallow saucers of grass, twigs, and roots placed in high bushes in forest with thick undergrowth" - (Fauna of British India).

Eggs : 2 to 3 in number. "Like others of this sub-family, but rounder than those of the Malkohas, and more like those of *Centropus*. 12 eggs average 35.8 x 27.0 mm." - (Fauna of British India).



A SHIFTING NESTING SITE FOR A PAIR OF INDIAN ROBINS. AADISH DANI, Life Research Foundation, 1000/6-C Pranov, Navi Peth, Pune 411 030

I report an unusual nesting behaviour of a pair of Indian robins from the same area, observed for two consecutive nesting seasons. The pair in question was found trying to establish a nest in the hollow beneath the seat of a moped. The nest was built almost to completion, as far as I could follow it. The choice of nesting site is unusual enough, and more so when it is realised that the nesting site (the moped) used to go away in the evening; only to return the next day and get parked at any available place in the parking lot. This used to be repeated day after day, with the pair resuming the nest building activity on the subsequent day, in the same moped, parked in it's new place. The time at which the moped left in the evening, used to vary from day to day. In the following nesting season,

a similar nesting attempt was observed with another moped at the same parking lot. This time the place of the moped was deliberately varied in the parking lot, but the nesting pair located and resumed their nest building in it, day after day. It is not known if the pair proceeded to lay eggs in either of the cases.

The parking lot was not a concrete enclosure, but a small open space amidst the large campus of Pune University. What then made the moped, such a tempting nesting site? The more intriguing questions that follow from this observation are the way in which birds identify their nesting sites. Do they sense the shift in the nesting site, in relation to its previous place; and thereby involve a sense of mapping? Or do they identify the nest site irrelevant of any identification marks in the vicinity, such that a shift of the nest site from its previous place goes unnoticed? Controlled experiments need to be done to rule out either of these possibilities.



OSPREY IN KARAIVETTI LAKE NEAR TIRUCHIRAPALLI, TAMIL NADU. PROF A RELTON, DR ORIN GELDERLOOS and DR LINDA, Nature Club, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirapalli

On 16th January 1997 members of our Nature Club and participants of the "Ecology of the Indian Tropics Course" from USA went for Midwinter Waterfowl Census to Karaivetti Lake, which is recently declared as a Bird Sanctuary.

We saw a single dark brown bird, sitting on the top of a dead *Acacia nilotica* tree at the far end. We focused our spotting scope, to our surprise it was an osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*).

We have been visiting this lake regularly for the past 11 years. It is the first time we have recorded this bird in this area.



STATUS OF ORIENTAL DARTER AND COMB DUCK IN WEST BENGAL. KAUSHIK DEUTI, Nature Environment & Wildlife Society (NEWS), 10, Chowringhee Terrace, Calcutta 700 020

Since 1990 several nature-clubs, organisations and individuals surveyed 46 major and minor wetlands in West Bengal during January every year as part of the Asian mid-winter waterfowl census. The data was mostly collected by WWF-India (Eastern Region) who coordinated the census and sent it to the Asian Wetland Bureau (now known as Wetlands International, Asia-Pacific) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Two easily identifiable and large-sized species, the oriental darter or snake bird (*Anhinga melanogaster*) and comb duck or nakta (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*) were sighted only in 7 and 5 wetlands respectively during the last 8 years (1990-1997). Even in these sites, their population was very low thus suggesting the precarious position of these waterbirds atleast in the wetlands of West Bengal. The sighting records are tabulated below:

Oriental Darter/Snake bird

| | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Rabindra Sarobar, Calcutta | 2 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2 | |
| Palla Water Works, North 24 Pgs dist | | | 1 | | 1 | |
| Kalyani lake, Nadia district | 1 | | | | | |
| Santiniketan, Birbhum dist | | | | | | 1 |
| Ahira jheels, Murshidabad dist | | | | | | 2 |
| Teesta riverside, Jalpaiguri dist | | | | 1 | | |
| Nandikhol river, Darjeeling dist | | 1 | | | | |

Comb Duck/Nakta

| | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1997 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Alipore Zoo lake, Calcutta | 2 | 2 | | | | | |
| Santragachi jheel, Howrah district | | | | | | | 5 |
| Palla Water Works, North 24 Pgs dist | | | | | | 2 | |
| Kalyani lake, Nadia district | | | | | | | 1 |
| Santiniketan, Birbhum dist | 9 | | 3 | 11 | 8 | 10 | |



INDIAN PITTAS DYING DURING MIGRATION. DR ANIL PIMPLAPURE, Q-12, Siddhivinayak Apartments, Laxminagar, Nagpur 440 022

On 11th June 1996 at Nagpur Shri Gopal Thosar rang me, and asked me to come to his house immediately. I rushed to his house. To my surprise he showed me a beautiful bird, but unfortunately it was dead. It was the Indian pitta (*Pitta brachyura*) found dead on a house terrace, the same morning.

The specimen was fresh and there was no external injury to the bird. We decided to hand it over to the Nagpur Museum which has a good collection of birds.

Surprisingly, the very next day (12th June 1996) one more dead Indian pitta was found on the same tract by one of Mr Thosar's student. This bird also had no external injury and even the wings were intact.

The autopsy at the Nagpur Veterinary College showed that death was due to rupture of the liver.

As reported by Dr Salim Ali in the Handbook "On return migration (Northwards) from Ceylon the birds are attracted to the lights of residential buildings on foggy nights; as many as ten some times being taken in one particular rest house during a single evening".

Is it a first reported casualty of Indian Pitta in Central India during northward migration?



SALIM ALI CENTENARY CELEBRATED IN LONDON. TARA GANDHI, C/o High Commission of India, Pretoria, South Africa, Diplomatic Bag Section, Ministry of External Affairs, South Block, New Delhi 110 011

Ornithologists and nature lovers gathered together at a function in London on 7 December 1996, to commemorate the birth centenary of Dr Salim Ali. An illustrated talk "*Focus on Indian Ornithology*" was presented by Tim Inskipp and Carol Inskipp, covering the broad spectrum of bird life in India and current conservation issues. Dr Salim Ali's pioneering contribution to the development and advancement of ornithology in India was particularly emphasised.

Prof Chris Perrins, Director of the Edward Grey Institute of Ornithology, Oxford, chaired the occasion and gave a brief biographical sketch of Dr Salim Ali with appreciative references to personal associations with him. The President and members of the London Natural History Society, members of the Oriental Bird Club, Birdlife International, British Trust for Ornithology, World Conservation Monitoring Centre and other conservation organisations attended the talk. Andrew Robertson and Vivek Menon also participated.

The event was held under the auspices of The Nehru Centre, High Commission of India in London, organised with the assistance of Tara Gandhi and Uma Anand.



APPEAL TO DONATE COPIES OF THESES ON BIRDS TO BNHS LIBRARY. DR ASAD R RAHMANI, Director, Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Dr Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023, India

The library of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) has one of the finest collection of books in Asia on natural history. Thanks to the influence of ornithologists like Stuart Baker, Hugh Whistler and Dr Salim Ali, BNHS is known for its vast amount of literature on Indian ornithology. On exchange basis, BNHS receives many journals on birds and other natural history subjects. Numerous research students, especially in ornithology, have benefited from the BNHS library. Presently, the library is being computerised for easy access to literature. The Ministry of Environment and Forests has selected BNHS for its Environmental Information Systems (ENVIS) programme for dissemination of data on birds and wetlands.

During the last 30 years, many Indian researchers have submitted Master of Science (M.Sc) or Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) dissertation on birds. BNHS library is planning to have copies of all such dissertations. Our library records show that we have only 36 dissertations on birds. The list can be supplied on request.

I request all the researchers to send a copy of his/her M.Phil/Ph.D dissertation(s) to BNHS library. These will be safely kept and made available to other researchers.

In many universities, researchers have submitted theses on birds but their work is either not published or not properly known. I request the readers of *Newsletter* to kindly inform BNHS the names and addresses of such persons so we can contact them.

BIRDS IN A FOREST FRAGMENT IN BANGALORE CITY. DR. M.B. KRISHNA, The Heritage, 10 Ranga Rao Road, Shankarapuram, Bangalore 560 004

Cities grow, and Bangalore is no exception. The net result is that birdwatchers have to travel farther and farther afar to get to good habitats. But occasionally, towns and cities grow so fast that they just engulf protected vegetated patches which still continue to be viable habitats for birds and other small animals.

One such place is Doresanipalya State Forest in south Bangalore. It is a small patch which is just a little over thirty hectares in extent and is said to have been a lac reserve once. It is quite open and has a few scattered *Shorea* trees, a few experimental plantation plots of bamboo and acacia (both *A. auriculiformis* and *A. mangium*) and patches of *Eucalyptus tereticornis*, amongst others. Apart from isolated Sandal-wood trees, there are hardly any other fruit bearing plants. Those flowering tree species with large attractive blooms are also conspicuous by their absence, that too in spite of the patch being within Bangalore!

It was here that the local birdwatchers' group had been to on the second Sunday of June to watch birds. The usual shrub zone species like the tailor bird and the ashy wren-warbler were there. So was the whiteheaded babbler, the most common species of its group here in Bangalore. A soaring shikra (this is the end of the breeding season) soon joined the silhouettes of pariah kites and house swifts in the sky. The location of this forest patch (which adjoins the suburb of JP Nagar and is close to the urbanised village of Arakere) meant that the presence of jungle crows and Indian mynas was assured. Crow-pheasants and koels brought up the presence of the cuckoo family, while the fruit eating birds were represented by the Tickell's flowerpecker and the whitebrowed bulbul.

Amongst the sunbirds, the purplerumped was the most frequently seen, and a Loten's sunbird did make a couple of us feel lucky (Mr Futehally and me of course!). On the margin of the forest patch, a pair of black drongos found useful perches. A pair of redwattled lapwings flew past calling excitedly. Many blacknaped hares running off, did remind us that the grass on the ground had been taken for granted in our ramblings in the forest patch.

In spite of the weather being cloudy (but rather pleasant for us) many species of butterflies were up and about. I was told that there were nearly a couple of dozen butterfly species there that day.

At the end of the morning's birdwatching, we were left wanting to see more, and wondering why we had not seen enough in an area which looked so promising. The variety in the vegetation was good, ranging from grass on the ground to tall trees and bushes, but somehow one felt that there ought to have been more flowering and fruiting trees and shrubs which encouraged birds better. Let us hope that a forester's old priority of just harvesting, changes to newer nobler ones, and planting up of the area is taken up so as to enable more birds and animals to find a home here.

TALL OAKS FROM BUSY JAYS GROW

Throughout history the common name for one of the most widespread members of the crow family has had curiously mixed associations. For the English subjects of Henry VIII, for example, the word "jay" was a pejorative term meaning either a simpleton or a person in gaudy costume. Even in modern usage we retain something of these negative connotations when we talk of the thoughtless pedestrian "jay walking".

In the classical period, however, they knew better. The citizens of Athens and Rome were sensitive to the birds' beauty and were accustomed to keep them as pets (jay is, in fact, a corruption of the Latin praenomen, *Gaius*, which is retained more completely in the modern French name, *Geai des chenes*). They were equally aware of the jays' capacity to master Greek and Roman pronunciation, and regularly taught birds to speak. As early as Aristotle's time they were apparently familiar with the behaviour that most indicated the jays' intelligence - the habit of storing food for the winter.

Over the past month, all across the northern hemisphere, from Japan westwards to the Pacific coast of North America, jays and their close relatives have been busy catching thousands of tonnes of food. In fact, it is this brief but intense burst of activity that converts a normally shy bird into a highly visible element of the autumn landscape. At present in Norfolk, jays seem to be everywhere, flying between belts of oak with their curiously bounding, almost butterfly-like action, or hopping beneath the trees, scolding us with their harsh calls that account for one of many old country names, the devil-scratch.

All this intense activity is devoted to a single crop - acorns. The birds store them in a specially distensible pouch beneath the tongue and then fly to a spot where the ground is soft enough for the acorns to be buried. Carrying as many as nine acorns, a bird will travel more than 4 km to find exactly the right sort of storage area. Studies reveal that an individual bird makes up to 60 of these journeys a day, and during the autumn months stores away about 5,000 acorns. This is an impressive figure, but it is the total number planted by all Europe's jays that I find even more exciting. Working from known western European populations, excluding Italy and the Iberian peninsula, I calculate that jays are burying in the region of 20 billion acorns a year.

They compound this feat of economic prudence with a gift for memorising exactly where they have left their harvest, sometimes digging through 40 cm of snow to retrieve it. However, they never remember all their stores and it has also been shown that a high proportion of oaks derive from nuts planted by jays. Moreover, during the burying process birds favour open areas where they can keep a sharp lookout for predators - a location all the more beneficial for the surviving saplings.

Different members of the crow family have parallel relationships with other trees. In northern Russia, for example, nutcrackers do



ILLUSTRATION: ANN HOBDAY

much the same with the seeds of aralia and Siberian stone pines. In North America the pinyon jay has a symbiotic relationship with the pinyon pine, while Clark's nutcrackers have a mutual dependence on a range of pine species.

It always strikes me as deeply sad that an aspect of the jays' behaviour far better known is their predation of the eggs and young of songbirds. But next time you're upset by the jays' slaughter of these helpless nestings, or irritated by their painfully loud, screeching call, remember: a good deal of the world's temperate forests are planted by them.

Guardian weekly, November 3, 1996.

UNUSUAL BREEDING PLUMAGE OF LARGE CORMORANTS. *R.G. SONI, Chief Conservator of Forests & Chief Wildlife Warden, Rajasthan, Jaipur*

After a rather long period large cormorants nested in good numbers in Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur this year (1996). But the breeding plumage especially on their heads was much different than I had seen in the past. All these birds had almost completely white upper neck and sides of the face with a prominent long black line along the crest and down the neck (see photo). Similar peculiar white plumage was also seen on about 10 large cormorants near Amer (Jaipur). I shall be grateful if readers could kindly enlighten me whether it is a peculiar plumage or a different race of the large cormorant.



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Cover: Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayi*) is easily the commonest heron in India. This bird can be seen stalking in the shallows; walking over lily pads and wading across puddles at the margins of lakes, rivers and open sewers in search of insects, worms and tadpoles. When disturbed the Pond Heron springs to life with a sudden burst of white wings, uttering a harsh croak.

Photo: S. Sridhar, ARPS